

**Presentation to
Pinner philosophy Group
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Sigmund Freud: Is there more to us than we think?

The question has been asked as to whether the premise should be re-worded to, 'Is there less to us than we think'? I'll return to this inflection later.

Although that reworded question might seem to mean the opposite, I think that it can also be interpreted as the same question, alluding to the contention either way that what you see in another person, or what we see in ourselves, is not necessarily in line with reality.

Sigmund Freud's life spanned the years 1856 to 1939. 20 Maresfield Gardens, NW3 is a wonderful empirical backdrop. Born in Moravia. Raised in Vienna's Jewish community.

Complex relationship with Judaism. Although describing himself as a godless Jew, he did identify with Jewish intellectual traditions which shaped his thinking. His emphasis on textual interpretation, debate and the search for hidden meaning reflects methods central to

Jewish scholarship, particularly Talmudic hermeneutics. The psychoanalytic technique of finding latent content beneath manifest content mirrors traditional Jewish approaches to interpreting sacred textai

I often wonder how psychiatry and associated understandings about human beings would have been different had he not lived. I have similar thoughts about all sorts of individuals down the years. Similarly, I often conjecture about there being and there having been non-existent individuals who might, how they lived, changed the world.

I have often wondered to what extent British awareness of him might have been different had he not lived here at the very end of his life.

I am also fascinated by the extent to which there might be a disjunction between his breaking down of preconception in his patient and then facilitating the emergence of a new gestalt within that patient on the one hand, and hanging rigidly onto his own diagnostic frameworks himself on the other. He allows himself to be hidebound by learnt attitudes and behaviours, while proscribing the same in his patients.

His own childhood needs some scrutiny inasmuch as it throws light. They were eight of them in the family including six siblings. Sigmund had his own room in a 3-bedroom apartment. As a child he complained about the noise of his sister's piano practice. The bulky Steinway was gone in 24 hours. It was said that Sigmund never questioned his own solipsism in this and other connections.

Already I don't know whether my impugning of a totemic person is upsetting to anybody, including myself, in fact. Ron Harris story (1968).

Freud started in neurology. Influenced by Jean-Martin Charcot.

Freud spent several months when he was 29 years old studying under him in Paris and developed his own understanding of the concepts of hysteria and hypnosis at this point.

- Legitimising psychological causes of physical and organic illness. Essential relationship between auto-suggestion and pathology.

Indeed, we all know that the body can change its constitution derivative from frame of mind.
Headaches, arousal bowel movement, sweating.

- Power of the unconscious. (Avoid the term subconscious, btw.) All the above criteria but augmented by the contention that half the time you've no idea why you feel as you do. This is a kind of hijacking of the consciousness and the physical body.
- The shift from neurology to psychology. The talking cure; the mapping of id, ego and superego. Structure and dynamics of the self.

He called his first son Jean-Martin

From this moment he began hypnosis, mainly at first, treating “hysterical women”, claiming that he cured them.

So, symptoms have causes that are not physical.

Holland and Barrett. (Joke about ‘how can I live longer’.)

Hysteria. Not just in a philological sense, but in a semantic one too, is this word misogynistic?

Emotional gerrymandering. Good Friday story.

While in France, Freud could not persuade Parisians that he was speaking comprehensible French. Analogous to the cliché about speaking English loudly to foreigners will do the trick.

Jimmy, Reginald Perrin's brother-in-law, is a posher version of Alf Garnett in this respect. So, once again, how well did he even know himself?

In terms of the discreditation that Freud's reputation may or may not have experienced in modern times, I do feel that the psychosexual stages of development have taken the most notable kicking. I must say that I find much of this side of his theories conjectural at best.

The **Oral Phase** is the first of them. Taking pleasure from operating via the mouth. Various embodiments of this. Sucking, eating, shouting etc.

Then the **Anal Stage** (1 to 3 years). Anally retentive and expulsive. I can see more sense here. Strange that the word 'anal' is so much a part of contemporary language.

Some have argued that capitalism – while being entirely defensible economically – can easily subside into and be attributed to retentiveness.

Computers can be said to be retentive of information; I think this is a useful paradigm to see the positives and negatives.

Indeed, Freud argued that retentiveness is not just a constipational negative. It can be a positive, acting as a repository allowing the child to be a mannequin and make of him or herself what they will.

Freud said that the **Phallic Stage**, age 3 to 6, with the Oedipus / Electra stage beginning at age 4 or 5 in boys. Sexual desire is desire to possess.

Father as rival; father senses and fears castration. Impedes father / son relationship.

Latency is the next stage in his timeframe. It is pre-pubescent. Sublimation of sexualised urges. The individual construct a calm before the adolescent storm by committing to activities such as sport and schoolwork.

Key objections to all this:

1. There seems to be a lack of empirical evidence for much of his positing of these stages.
2. It seems strange that someone so disposed to analysing nuances in society and in individuals failed to give any room to differences that might have been wrought within his stages by cultural difference. It seems if he wished to corral all those of given ages into certain cognitive frameworks, whether they are from New York or Papua New Guinea. Nor am I sensing sufficiency in modifications engendered by historical movement. So, from my paradigm 'New York / Papua New Guinea' read '21st centuries BCE and CE'.

But at this juncture, I want to stick up for Sigmund. It's too easy to criticise creativity with hindsight, and I think we have to build into our critiques a tolerance that such a pioneering genius was going to make mistakes. Analogously, Ernest Rutherford (1871 to 1937) was a pioneering researcher in atomic and nuclear physics. But he made errors Revealed by his successors. These errors should not be a green light for the next batch of researchers to traduce those who came before them with astonishing insight. Churlish and insulting.

There does seem to be a centricity about heterosexuality in Freud's constructs. As you might imagine, although there wasn't much invective or polemic against homosexuals from him, he was conservative and quite censorious in its context. That said, he did become more tolerant. But it is difficult to know whether the changing tides of his mind were independent or predicated on the fact that his own daughter Anna was probably a lesbian, and at one stage conducting an affair with a noted analyst's daughter, Dorothy Burlingham.

Conscious; preconscious; unconscious.

I think I see the preconscious as an extension to the conscious. (Having someone's phone number in the back of your mind, that you can readily retrieve.) The interesting category for today's purposes is the unconscious. This the element which evinces a self not known oneself.

Abuse and ill-treatment until the age of 3. No memory of this, but then patterning of one's life according to it.

The consciousness as an iceberg. As far as what's below the visibility line is concerned, it could be said to be a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.

Hypnosis as revelator. Does it work? Not for me, unfortunately.

Possibility that with maturation, your person enables the healing with time the wounds caused by trauma. Why, necessarily, would you want to bash off all the scabs that have organically formed as your knees' guardian angel.

People isolate hypnosis into a hidebound, and bewitching context as something done by psychiatrists or comedians, involving pocket watches, but the actuality is obviously much more nuanced.

Semi-hypnosis of journey to work, or the reading of a boring book.

To be hoped that the genie released is one who is curative if not preventative.

I have always understood the goal of therapeutic hypnosis to assume that bogeyman of one's life took up residence in one's psyche at a stage when a child, for example, was unable to sift, doubt and process the authenticity of the bogeyman; which then become concretised by lack of therapeutic attention to them, force of habit and then the nursing of them as false

friends by the patient in question. They have introduced neurosis into the individual who then clings onto them for fear of finding worse if they are released into the ether.

There are many evil people in the world (or “out there” to use the modern idiom) who plant these demons,

Concept of the “ambulance chaser” which has slightly different meaning in my mind from its orthodox connotation.

My view is that in terms of our position within the contexts of the universe and our own myriad fallibilities, we are always liable to be that vulnerable child.

Is there anyone who feels able to speak of experience of hypnosis, and whether it was beneficial, deleterious or neither.

Axiomatically, successful hypnosis evinces and introduces an alternative persona.

Religious dogma of one’s self, the identity of which determines heaven or damnation. Over-simplistic, not least in terms of phenomena such as sleep, amnesia or dementia, during which phases the prescribed

consciousness of the deity required by orthodoxy is not there. This is distinct from other disablers of fundamentalist philosophies of heaven or hell, such as cultural or historical relativity. Often believers contend that God takes everything into account, but this in itself seems in contradiction of the unavoidable role played in their views by the bald question. Have you adopted Christ as your redeemer? Yes or no?

Freudian slips (parapraxes). These represent some kind of confusion between two iterations of ourselves. Perhaps redolent of Jung's 'Shadow Self'?

The notion that the slip reveals something unspoken or even unknown to the utterer. The unconscious mind finding expression for the slip of the tongue (spoonerised).

MP from Hull Central. Emily Maitlis. Victoria Derbyshire.

Tram story

J. P. Morgan story.

Camus' story in *La Chute*. (The whole book is about duplicity, casuistry and cognitive dissonance. Go through brief chronology of his work in this respect.)

Without conclusive evidence, there was much gossip about an affair Sigmund had with Minna Bernays, who was far more intellectual than her Hausfrau sister, Martha.

Defence mechanisms

American psychologist, William James (1842 – 1910): “A man has as many social selves as there are distinct groups of people.”

We have even at a conscious level glaring contradictions in us, and attendant duplicity.

I was aware of this for the first time that university, not knowing how to mix discrete friendship groups.

To this day, my diction, phrasing and spoken register alter depending on my interlocutor. Is this pusillanimous and hypocritical or is it pragmatic and considerate of those in whose company I am? Patricia spoke so well about hegemony three weeks ago. I think it is often thought and voiced that one’s liability to acquiesce with a group – thereby allowing that hegemony – diminishes with age. I think it does, but less than one might think.

We all adopt the personas of those around us, and hope they counterbalance this by copying us.

Social proof; consensus validation.

It is taken as an axiom that truthfulness is the best option in life, firstly on an ethical (and therefore humanising) basis, but also on a practical level inasmuch as it is easy to forget which lies one has told to whom.

Music tastes. My father (drainpipe trousers story).

Traffic behaviour. We hide who we are as pedestrians.

<https://m.youtube.com/shorts/USeCYdDob18>

Grammatical correctness. I have two personas.

Judging physical appearance. I have two personas. One where I judge criteria (tattoos etc); one where I do not.

Crying. We have recently seen Rachel Reeves and Penny Mordaunt in tears in the House of Commons. The notion that women are weaker emotionally than men is preposterous, so what is going on here? There is a social self here available to only half the

population. I tend to the view that by suppressing their tears, men are repressing themselves.

In schools, access arrangements for a tightly circumscribed range of neurological conditions. Difference between these and other generalised intellectual lacunae? (Thomas Szasz)

Generosity is a paradox. It is so rewarding to be generous. This is counterintuitive from the point of being happy owing to a dwindling bank balance, but I think there is agreement that endorphins or something of that sort of flow very pleasingly in ourselves when we are generous.

One of the centralities of the hypocrisy of the double (or multiple) persona is embodied in the expression, 'I'm sorry'. Much of the time, we mean 'I'm sorry I was caught out'.

My father in a crowd situation used to say, "I'm terribly sorry; are you in my way?

We also allow ourselves to self-refract into a different individual, depending on circumstance.

Being told news can illustrate that we don't know ourselves in the composite and rational way that we might feel is justified.

Two different ways of telling the same news yield polar opposites of reception. (News of fire etc.)

Woody Allen story

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901 in journal form; then published as novel in 1904.)

Considering the numerous cases of such deviations, Freud concludes that the boundary between the normal and abnormal human psyche is unstable and that we are all a bit neurotic. Such symptoms are able to disrupt eating, sexual relations, regular work, and communication with others. The pathology unseats and hijacks the original self. Freud noted that there is no limit to how long unconscious imagery can dwell in the psyche.

Within a few years of its publication, the book became very well known, and Freud as whatever the equivalent of celebrity was in those days. When at sea on his way to the USA in 1909, Freud noticed that his cabin boy had a copy.

Einstein story.

Witch hunts. The Crucible (Arthur Miller). Pogroms. Beatles' records being burnt.

Hysteria is real, as is the attendant refraction splintering of personality. (Though the imputation solely to women is absurd.)

We sometimes do not face our own hypocrisy, and adhere to morally upstanding ethics in one context while failing to realise that we are failing to hold to such laudatory ethics in a different but analogous situation.

Beckham scenario.

The societal self.

We all have a public self which is curated and somewhat at odds with the self that we “share with ourselves”. My view is that this societal self is almost always more prudish and less prurient than the self which we do not share. There could be multiple reasons for this, but a chief one in my view is That we have a default not to stray from safe, collective positions of morality.

Asterisks in print replace language which we fear might betray our vulgarity. Euphemisms like “the N word” or “the C word” play the same role.

I think we can agree that all language when it is used abusively could do with being effaced or eliminated. But reporting the news should not be fettered by the same limitations. The words themselves carry no meaning, offensive or otherwise. No one would think to put an asterisk in the word “sod” when it means a piece of turf. It is not the word that is offensive; It is the connotation.

Reporters should have a duty to say or write what has happened, all the more so if something offensive has been said or written.

There was a letter in The Times a year or so ago along the following lines making my point for me:

Sir, In your editorial about a backbencher’s response to the budget yesterday, you wrote that he had called the Chancellor a p****. Could I ask whether you meant that he was calling him a p**** or a p****?

It is often said that readers’ and listeners’ sensitivities must be respected in reporting. But by this token, the words Hitler and Auschwitz should also be asterisked.

I think it is relatively straightforward to demonstrate how easily manipulatable our emotions are by circumstance. Two versions of a story about a housefire.

The ‘social self’ can be a mask covering one’s evil underneath. There is a truly remarkable documentary directed in 1955 by Alain Resnais: ‘*Nuit et Brouillard*’. 30 minutes. Available on YouTube. It is about the horrors of the concentration camps. The title borrows deliberately from one of Hitler’s directives, ‘*Nacht und Nebel*’. In terms of the social (societal) self, I am as shocked by the first of the following stills from the film as I am by the second. The first one evinces the insidiousness of Nazism in that the self-conferred license of respectability was precisely the anaesthetising influence on their conscience that allowed them to do what they did.

Here is the first slide.

And the second one is coming now. The film is actually a ‘15’, but you might prefer to look away now.

Dreams

Wish fulfilment is self-evidently an aspect of oneself not played out in everyday life. The classic Freudian interpretation of dreams is that they embody a wish fulfilment. From my own experience I must disagree, I find them preponderantly to figure a dreaded scenario.

Leitmotif dreams. Some of my dreams are easy to interpret within the matrix of my fears, but others are not.

Reality is perceptual, not objective. If I got a broken nose playing rugby, and therefore don't like rugby, I am not going to perceive rugby in a manner reflective of another person's perception of it. This is a Proustian idea about which I spoke a few months ago. Everyone knows about the madeleine cake.

And so, our self can shift significantly, contingent neither on others' perception of reality, nor on our own perception of reality at a different time or in a different circumstance.

Painting a picture of the self that is buffeted by the waves of circumstance, it is hardly surprising that Freud wrote, "The ego is not master in its own house".

I spoke earlier of the different stages of childhood that Freud believed in. As most people know, this was later developed further into the tripartite model of the id, the ego and the superego, illustrating that we are not unified, transparent beings. Instead, we are battlegrounds of competing forces most of which operate outside our awareness.

The Id is the hidden engine.

The id is unconscious and not directly experienced by us. It is the primitive instinct tool part of us present from birth, operating on the pleasure principle it contains our raw sexual and aggressive drives, our most basic needs and desires.

The id is not concerned with reality, morality or consequences. Just once instant gratification. When you feel an inexplicable surge of anger or inappropriate attraction or a sudden craving, this is Freud's id pushing from below. We don't feel it working but we do feel its effects.

The Superego (The internalised Judge)

The superego is largely unconscious too. It develops through childhood as we internalise our parents and society's moral standards. It is our conscience and

embodies what we aspire to be. Freud felt that we do not often realise why we feel guilt, shame or anxiety. The superego operates like an internal critic that we cannot switch off, punishing us with feelings that we cannot always interpret.

The Ego (the Struggling Mediator)

The ego is partly conscious, partly unconscious. It attempts to balance the demands of the id and moral constraints of the superego. It is the ego which uses defence mechanisms. These mechanisms are relatively easy to track when they are conscious, but according to Freud most of them operate unconsciously; you don't decide to deploy denial or repression. These phenomena happen automatically, thereby protecting you from anxiety that you do not realise is hovering. Psychoanalysts have the job of deciding whether, or to what extent, to tease out a comprehension of what is going on in order to be able to deal with it alongside the patient.

I think most people from our broad cultural background (in this room) recognise that homosexuality is more apparent than it was 60 years ago. This is partly attributable to its decriminalisation in the UK in 1967. My view, in addition, is that its mainstream acceptability has validated many people

coming out who perhaps yesteryear would have repressed who they were, in many cases not even recognising it themselves.

Such release buttons for individuals are, of course, to be cherished, and draw into focus a previous intolerance that was a manacle on one area of society's cohesion. I sense a preponderance in society in the contention that homophobia is ludicrous.

Freud's model of analysis reveals that what we think we are – our conscious rational self – is the ego's conscious aspect of trying to navigate between forces of which we are not fully aware.

The person we present to others, and even to ourselves is a compromise formation. Our actual motivations, true desires and fears are largely hidden. For Freud, self-knowledge requires the excavation of hypnosis given that the conscious mind is routinely involved in acts of self-deception. Freud believed that elemental acts, such as choice of life partner, are often engaged in according to these factors.

I think it is within this framework that Freud can be said to have revolutionised psychology. He believed that we are mysteries to ourselves and that our conscious intentions are often post hoc

rationalisations, and that genuine self-understanding requires looking beneath the surface at forces that we might prefer not to see.

Just to explain my use of 'post hoc'. It's when we create plausible explanations for our behaviour *after the fact* without realising the unconscious motives that have driven us. It is a kind of network of internalised sophistry.

In Freudian terms, this might be embodied by a man who has had a censorious, critical mother then being attracted to cold, emotionally unavailable women who treat him poorly. When questioned about this, he might say that he likes independent, strong women, that he likes a challenge, and that other women are too clinging. Putting words into Freud's mouth, he (Freud) might retort that the man is compulsively trying to win the love and approval he never got from his mother, unconsciously attempting to resolve that childhood wound. The rational explanation is that his ego is protecting him from the uncomfortable truths

Other examples might be as follows:

- A line manager sacking somebody because of performance issues, when in fact the manager felt threatened by that person;

- Forgetting a dental appointment because one is scared of drills;
- Criticising a trait in somebody that they unconsciously possess themselves, believing that they are just being honest. (This is known as projection.);
- A frippery! My story to my daughters about alligators.

I often fantasise at, say, Hitler or Stalin being prepared to be psychoanalysed. When looking at the footage of Martin McGuinness and Rev'd Ian Paisley breaking bread together, I have wondered whether one, or both, of them had perhaps been on a couch. I've never seen anything quite like this. Hatred, bigotry and remorseless violence metamorphosing into über-bonhomie and giggling affability. I believe they were known as The Chuckle Brothers.

Plato's charioteer. Appears in *Phaedrus*. The soul is depicted as a charioteer driving two winged horses.

- One horse is noble and good (representing spirit/thumos – our sense of honour pride and righteous emotion);
- The other horse is unruly and difficult (representing appetite / epithymia, base desires and physical cravings);

- The charioteer (representing reason / logos) must guide both horses towards philosophical truth.

Comparisons can, of course, be facile, but the charioteer can in some ways be seen to map onto the ego, both being mediators trying to navigate reality while managing competing internal forces. The charioteer is balancing the two horses' different natures, and the ego could be said to be mediating between the id and the superego while dealing with external reality.

Plato is not the only Freudian 'avant la lettre'.

There is a scene in the Iliad where Achilles engages in internal deliberation, speaking with his soul (psyche). He debates two possible life paths. He tells the embassy that his mother, Thetis, prophesied that he has two fates: either stay at Troy and win eternal glory but die young, or return home to live a long, obscure life. In addition, he debates with himself about whether to kill Agamemnon or restraining himself. (He ultimately does the latter.) These internal conflicts between competing desires could indeed be read through a proto-Freudian lens.

Modern politics. John McCain's concession speech in 2008 is the only gracious one of its kind that I've ever heard.

Rachel Reeves and Sir Keir do seem to be making it up a little as they go on. Abandoning their true selves and adopting positions representing the pragmatism of getting power. My impression is that New Labour in 1997 was the first time this really reared up. Perhaps Kinnock to a small extent. (Mrs Thatcher dead parrot story: stiff creases ironed out.)

Does the fact that politicians do not celebrate the victories of their opponents represent a triumph of baser forces within them, over a celebration of the fact that the people have voted? There is loud rhetoric to the effect that democracy is paramount. Should this not trump any ephemeral disappointment that they have lost?

Socrates believed voting was a skill requiring knowledge and wisdom, not a random intuition. He was pessimistic about democracy, comparing it to a ship where only skilled navigators should be in charge, not just any passenger. He feared that in democracy the uneducated masses would easily be swayed by demagogues who used charisma and empty promises to gain power, leading to a 'societal shipwreck'.

Jokes

Freud wrote a whole book about them in 1905, and what they reveal. He felt that jokes were a way of releasing expressed aggression in such a way that you would not have to play out that aggression; moreover, he felt that the humoristic context offered by a joke legitimised the cathartic expression of an unpleasant thought or emotion. Do I deserve opprobrium for telling an Irish joke?

This chimes extraordinarily with contemporary sensibilities and current argument about concepts loosely framed as 'woke' and 'cancel culture'.

By the way, do we think that Alf Garnett and the Major in *Fawlty Towers* should be cancelled? The respective writers, Johnny Speight and John Cleese have both been called out as disingenuous and cowardly for averring that the humour is at the expense of the two bigots in question, and is not concordant with their views (Speight's and Cleese's); and that if we are stupid

enough not to see this, there is an “off” switch on the television.

On the basis that those writers’ claims are valid, I think the view that our laughter is cathartic (betraying latent prejudice) might hold some water.

A Freudian joke:

“My therapist says I have a preoccupation with vengeance. We'll see about that.”

Obviously a very innocuous joke. (I do know others.) This lets us enjoy a socially inappropriate, aggressive thought by framing it as self-aware humour about therapy itself.

In terms of Jewish humour itself, there are perhaps better examples.

(Give car smash and waiter examples.)

By way of germane contrast to Freud, I’d like to look briefly at Behaviourism, a counter-philosophy usually associated with John B. Watson (1878 to 1958) and B. F. Skinner (1904 to 1990).

There is LESS to us than we think. These men posited the florid pretentiousness of Freud's convoluted [sic] theories about the 'inner life'.

Watson is seen as the founder of Behaviourism, arguing that psychology should focus only on observable behaviour, not on consciousness or introspection.

Skinner eschewed discussion of internal mental states or feelings as causes of behaviour. He called these things part of the "black box", espousing the view that we do not need to look inside.

He explained all behaviour by looking at environmental stimuli (what happens to us), (responses) what we do, and consequences (reinforcement or punishment).

While Freud looked below the tip of the iceberg of consciousness, seeing there a churn of unconscious repression and conflict which drives behaviour, Skinner traduced this unhelpful conjecture [sic], and explained behaviour via observable environmental contingencies and not what he called invisible mental ghosts.

He said that to talk about internal states is vague, imprecise language describing behavioural patterns which have clearly been shaped by reinforcement

history. Indeed, we are all aware of Pavlov's dogs, and that other pets respond to being given treats or being punished.

I do have the impression that most dog owners think that unless you treat them pretty tough, you will quickly become the supplicant in the relationship. Dogs have owners; cats have staff.

Skinner did believe that the dangers of psychoanalysis are tantamount to those engendered by an incompetent surgeon. Given the inherent suggestibility of many patients who choose the Freudian line of enquiry, the opportunities for charlatanism are, Skinner felt, tempting and lucrative in equal measure.

Holland and Barrett. Some people are sceptical as to the efficacy of many of their lines. I see a systematic issue with how the products are marketed and regulated. The claims often sit in a carefully constructed grey zone – specific enough to sound compelling (supports immune function; promotes joint health) but vague enough to be almost impossible to disprove.

Perhaps also to some extent the market or customers vulnerable because they do have health concerns which they are very keen to sort out, sometimes

experiencing placebo effect to boot. My point here is that one's persona is likely to drift across the spectrum of credence according to what one's own ephemeral health situation might be.

My view is that the simplicity of Skinner's philosophy is its attraction and its undoing. I am seeing barbarisms such as aversion therapy as having their roots in Skinner's discourse.

Just returning to Freud and defence mechanisms, I do think that we sometimes jump on an interpretational bandwagon and failed take account of their role in our survival. We need them.

We need to eat and concentrate on our food, but we must also be aware of predation and the need to defend ourselves against it. I remember at primary school asking a teacher why our heads were unable to swivel like those of owls. I actually still don't know the answer to that question.

One part of the brain deals with the job in hand. Another part, less visible, deals with contextual matters. Vladimir Putin and Bibi Netanyahu – and Hamas leaders too – are each dealing with something. But do they really understand what the antecedents are of the contexts in which they act so decisively; and

do they fully comprehend the consequences of their actions? (Do any of us?) And are they able fully to place a value on trauma and how that trauma interlaces with geopolitics? I would love to know their dreams.

I feel that Freud would have argued that the actions of these sorts of men attributable in some measure to their own pasts. It is sobering to think that perhaps one man's maternal rejection and other forgotten setbacks were causal to some degree of the Holocaust. Hitler engineered the mechanisms (propaganda, ritual, spectacle, suppression of dissent) that produced the crowd responses that he then consumed as external validation. Each circle reinforces the next: he creates the conditions for acclaim, receives that acclaim, interprets it as independent verification of his righteousness, which emboldens more extreme actions, generating more orchestrated enthusiasm, and so on, spiralling inward toward an ever more concentrated delusion. There is something Dante-esque in this hellish concentricity.

Freud was sceptical about organised religion, not least on the grounds that there is clear mimesis going on in group worship situations. Returning to Patricia's word of three weeks ago, there is a hegemony exercised by the majority that naturally inveigles some outsiders. (Analogously, I am fascinated by fashion in naming

babies. Very few are called Cyril or Brian any more, and I think parents genuinely feel that they are ugly names, and perhaps don't notice that their aesthetic judgement has not been independently wrought. (Another example of post hoc judgment, if I may.)

You might be familiar with *Le Pari de Pascal*, or *Pascal's Wager*. (Pascal was a Jansenist.) On the basis that Christians go to heaven and everyone else goes to hell, he exhorts faith in Christ to cynics on the basis that it's a win / win. (Excuse that awful expression.) If Christianity is untrue, you've lost nothing. Dust to dust; everyone's on the same wicket.

Yet astonishingly, one obvious possible outcome to betting on the wrong horse never occurs to him. What happens if another exclusive religion is true, and not Christianity? Blaise Pascal was a serious theologian, but I feel his rationale was flawed.

Syllogism: All cows are animals; some animals eat grass. Therefore, some cows eat grass.

The above sounds terribly plausible and logically tight, but is flawed. I do see Pascal's wager as shtik too. He was a man with a fine mind whose belief structures were clearly refracted by circumstance.

Many people are converted to a particular religious belief within a social matrix or framework. Billy Graham rallies were a good example. However, imagine someone is marooned on a desert island, having never heard of any religion. One day a copy of the Bible washes up on the beach, and the castaway reads it. Next day it is the Quran. Then five further books that week of a similar type. The castaway reads them all with interest. My contention (conjectural, I concede) is that very few people, if any, would make a religious commitment on the basis of that scenario at the end of the week. Everything about such a decision of commitment depends on, and derives from, particular circumstances involving the agency or third-party human persuaders. Taking this back to a Freudian angle, if we extend this drift to personality and behaviour we are all engaged in constant mimesis. On the basis of this view, I believe that we float on the wind.

I have hinted at the possibility that religious faith might owe itself to the sort of hegemony spoken of before here. I think we are also talking of a mimesis that does seem to be part of the human condition.

I see Pascal's blindness to syllogistic truth as an obvious defence mechanism. The notion that, in the event of being wrong in a religious wager, Christians can have

their stake back, but that other people cannot, is clearly not befitting his towering intellect.

Allegiance to a football team. Even though I have in some sense self-administered the Freudian analysis, and seen the random absurdity of my affiliation to a certain club, this has not straightened out the emotions associated with defeat or victory.

I am fascinated by the concept of plagiarism, which is a pejorative term implying underhand copying. But what on earth would an ‘unplagiarised’ person look like. Sartre’s Roquentin, perhaps (in *La Nausée*). Nobody impugns the fact that the better a teacher is, the better his / her pupils are able to write good exam answers in plagiarism of that teacher.

There is a profound tension between inevitable influence and authentic selfhood. The plagiarism concept seems to me curiously selective in what it condemns.

It is an authentic expectation that we absorb, internalise and reproduce what we learn at school; yet this is called mastery in one context and plagiarism in another.

The distinction hinges on something nebulous. All creative output is unavoidably a product of its cultural moment and influences.

Beethoven's music emerges, I think, from Haydn, Mozart and the Mannheim school. The Beatles derived from Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Carl Perkins among others. We don't call this plagiarism even though the output derived from borrowed elements, recombined in a way that I cannot call possibly call disingenuous. These musicians mentioned were part of a continuum. There is no lack of authenticity for that.

Taking this back to a Freudian angle, if we extend the notion to personality and behaviour, we are all engaged in constant mimesis – learning social scripts, copying mannerisms, internalising values and patterns of life from our environment.

Freud's concern about this isn't just about authenticity in an abstract sense but about psychological health: when does adaptive social learning become pathological identification? When does the necessary process of ego-formation through imitation result in a self that is more echo than voice?

There is something troubling about the extent to which what we call 'ourselves' might be largely an assemblage of unacknowledged plagiarisms.

I will say just a word about Jacques Lacan (1901 to 1981) because he is seen as a successor in some ways to Freud.

Lacan did not so much advocate the excavation of the psyche that constituted the therapeutic goal of hypnosis. Rather, he concentrated on the distinction between the self-identified by the person in question and the self as seen by others. He believed that language itself took people, as it progressed, into areas of themselves that they had not previously seen. As soon as a child learns to use first person singular personal pronouns (I, me etc), they are learning to represent themselves through a signifier (a word). But here is the split: the 'I' who speaks is never quite the same as the 'I' being spoken about. There is a dichotomy between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement.

Maybe a bit like the surprise we get when we hear a recording of ourselves speaking, or when we look in the mirror.

Thanatos. Lacan went on to talk of “jouissance”. This takes me back the ‘death drive’ in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). It represents something darker and more baffling than repressed sexual desire. Freud means a silent drive towards dissolution and a return to an inorganic state, this being a way of undoing the tensions of life itself. This obviously appears counter-intuitive to any understanding of a survival instinct.

In putative corroboration, Freud observed repetition compulsion: trauma victims replaying their trauma and people sabotaging their own happiness. I remain unconvinced and believe that some forms and levels of masochism are part of the human condition, simply as part of the experimenting and explorational aspect of life. Tooth wagging.

People have asked whether there are observable traits passed down by Sigmund to his famous grandsons, Lucian and Clement. A bit of a stretch, albeit an intriguing one.

Lucian’s nudes do reveal flesh with an honesty that can be uncomfortable. A willingness to look at what others turn away from and a proclivity to looking beneath the human mask.

Clement's ability to observe human absurdity does connect to a psychoanalytic sensibility.

The id represents our primitive, instinctual drives—things like hunger, sexual desire, aggression, and the pursuit of immediate pleasure. It operates on the “pleasure principle,” wanting instant gratification without any concern for reality or consequences. Think of it as an impulsive child demanding what it wants right now.

The superego is essentially our internalized moral conscience—the values, ideals, and rules we've absorbed from parents, society, and culture. It strives for perfection and judges us harshly when we fall short. It's like a strict parent constantly telling us what we should do.

The ego sits between these two forces and operates on the “reality principle.” Its job is to find realistic, socially acceptable ways to satisfy the id's desires while also meeting the superego's moral standards. The ego essentially asks: “How can I get what I want in a way that's actually possible and won't get me in trouble or make me feel guilty?”

For example, if you're hungry (id impulse) but you're in the middle of an important meeting (reality) and stealing food would be wrong (superego), your ego finds a compromise—maybe you wait until the meeting ends and then buy lunch. The ego delays gratification and finds a solution that doesn't violate social norms or your moral standards.

When the ego struggles with this balancing act, Freud believed it could lead to anxiety and psychological defence mechanisms.

Defence Mechanisms

In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, defence mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies that the ego uses to protect itself from anxiety arising from conflicts between the id (our primitive desires) and the superego (our internalized moral standards).

Freud believed these mechanisms operate outside our conscious awareness and distort, deny, or transform reality to make threatening thoughts or feelings more manageable. His daughter Anna Freud later expanded on these concepts significantly.

Some of the key defence mechanisms include:

Repression is considered the most fundamental - it pushes threatening thoughts, memories, or desires completely out of conscious awareness. For example, someone might have no memory of a traumatic childhood event.

Denial involves refusing to acknowledge painful realities or facts. A person might insist they don't have a drinking problem despite clear evidence.

Projection attributes one's own unacceptable thoughts or feelings to someone else. If you're angry at someone but can't admit it, you might become convinced they're angry at you.

Displacement redirects emotions from the original source to a safer substitute target - like coming home angry at your

boss and snapping at your family instead.

Rationalization creates seemingly logical explanations for behaviours that are actually driven by unconscious motives, helping us avoid uncomfortable truths about ourselves.

Freud saw these mechanisms as normal parts of psychological functioning - everyone uses them to some degree. They only become problematic when used rigidly or excessively, preventing someone from dealing with reality effectively.

